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Constructing Consumer-Masstige brand relationships in a volatile social reality

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ABSTRACT

This article conceptualises how consumers construct their relationships with masstige brands. Drawing on a two-stage methodology of consumer interviews and online content analysis of brands' social media pages, we offer innovative insight into how consumers navigate consumer-masstige brand relationships (CMBRs). We present CMBRs as multiple, dynamic and capricious relationships, departing from the view of enduring brand relationships as monogamous marriages. The unique symbolic nature and more central role of masstige brands in consumers' identity projects, make CMBRs more intense and transient. The findings illustrate that 'masstige' brand status is continually negotiated within a complex web of on- and off-line dialogues between multiple actors (the consumer, masstige brand, other consumers and other brands (masstige, low/middle market and luxury)). Consumers expect masstige brands to be more responsive to their needs. The role of marketers as collaborators and enablers in consumers' identity projects is therefore more intense in CMBRs.

1. Introduction

The burgeoning of the middle-class and greater awareness of other cultures' ideas of the 'good life' have led to luxury brands becoming more attainable (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012; 2014). Increasingly, consumers are seeking to trade up for better quality, which has generated a new class of brand, *masstige* (Silverstein et al., 2008; Kumar et al., 2020). Masstige - a portmanteau term derived from 'mass prestige', refers to brands that are more affordable and accessible than luxury brands and cater for more of the mass-market. Masstige brands are priced higher than mass-market brands to signal a prestigious status (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003; Paul, 2015; Kumar et al., 2020).

The concept of masstige has gained popularity amongst marketing scholars in recent years. Existing masstige research predominantly focuses on the management of masstige brands, particularly price, value and positioning (e.g., Truong et al., 2009; Kastankis & Balabanis, 2014; Fain et al., 2015; Paul, 2019). Kumar et al. (2020), for example, propose a continuum of the marketing mix that positions masstige brands in relation to both luxury and mass-market brands. A further example is Paul's (2015) Masstige Mean Score Scale (MMSS) that measures the success of masstige brands and their positioning strategy. There is a

smaller, but growing body of research that adopts a consumer perspective. This includes Kastanakis and Balabanis' (2012) exploration of the propensity of consumers to engage in 'bandwagon' brand consumption, which they link to previous work on conspicuous consumption (e.g., Trigg, 2001; Shipman, 2004). A study by Kumar et al. (2021) also connects brand-induced consumer happiness to masstige brands via self-consciousness and the social ideal self. They find that: "the more masstige value a brand has, the more happiness in owning that brand will produce" (p. 6). In focusing on how masstige brands make consumers happy, Kumar et al.'s (2021) discussion stops short of establishing a comprehensive conceptualisation of how consumers' form and maintain relationships with masstige brands.

The scarcity of research on masstige consumption, particularly CMBRs, led us to take inspiration from the consumer-brand relationship (hereinafter CBR) literature. Here, academics and marketers have long sought to understand how consumers relate to, and form emotional connections with brands (e.g., Blackston, 1992; Fournier, 1998; Connors et al., 2021). CBR theory has been widely drawn on in the luxury domain. Consumers are drawn to brands, particularly luxury brands, that broaden and enhance their sense of self (Thakur & Kaur, 2015; de Kerviler & Rodriguez, 2019). Recent CBR research has found that CBRs

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are a collective and not an individual relationship between two partners, the brand and consumer. For example, Eastman et al.'s (2020) study on luxury CBRs recognises the importance of moving beyond bilateral 'consumer-brand' interactions to understand the wider net of relationships that influence luxury CBRs. They argue that social media, celebrities, family and friends play a critical role in influencing consumption and understanding how consumer-brand emotional bonds are built. Shin et al. (2021) also recognise that interpersonal influences, including family and peers, play a key role in shaping luxury CBRs. This is further evident in Schouten et al.'s (2007, p. 359) research on brand communities, where they recognise that CBRs are embedded in "a web of relationships that customers perceive themselves to have with a brand, a company, its products, and its other customers". We explore this web of relationships in the context of masstige brand relationships; a route not previously considered in the literature. Taking a social constructionist approach, we claim that CMBRs are established and maintained through the multiple dialogues that take place within this web of relationships, on- and off-line, between multiple relationship partners (people and organisations). It is critical to explore CMBRs on- and off-line due to the powerful influence social media has on CMBRs (Aslanidis, 2018).

The primary objective of this article is to advance how we envision masstige brand relationships. Thus, our primary research question is:

How do consumers construct and manage their contemporary CMBRs?

We address this question through data gathered in a two-stage research study that employed 15 semi-structured interviews and content analysis of the social media pages of 15 brands across five social media platforms (Facebook; Instagram; TikTok; Twitter; YouTube). In doing so, we make three contributions: First, our findings support and further develop the research of McAlexander and Schouten (2002) and Eastman et al. (2020), which puts forward that CBRs develop within a collective context. Our findings illustrate that CMBRs are a more complex web of relationships between people and organisations than other CBRs. We demonstrate that the meaning of 'masstige' is continually negotiated within a consumer's web of relationships at a collective rather than individual level and these relationships might therefore not be as enduring as CBRs. A brand's status as masstige contributes to enhancing consumers' identity projects, with this process subject to ongoing review and negotiation within the web of relationships. The nature and symbolic value of CMBRs make them more intensive than CBRs with low/middle mass-market or luxury brands, which means CMBRs require careful brand management. Second, in revisiting the concept of 'relationship' in the context of masstige brands, and examining the branding process as a dynamic continua, we advance knowledge of how CMBRs develop. CMBRs need to be understood as socially constructed, ongoing, dynamic and interactive processes where the consumer, the brand, other consumers and other brands (masstige, luxury and mass-market brands) are active agents in their development. Multiplicity and fluidity are more visible in CMBRs. This departs from much of the previous CBR research that heavily draws on the marriage relationship metaphor and Judeo-Christian ideology of marriage as an eternal dyadic relationship between two heterosexual partners (i.e., brand and consumer), which is built on a foundation of love and exclusivity. Wider socio-cultural factors, such as consumer lifestyle and attitude changes also have a powerful influence over the complex web of relationships in which a CMBR sits, shaping the nature of the CMBR. Third, we illustrate that CMBRs are more transient and less enduring in nature, which means it is even more important for consumers to see value in forming and/or continuing a CMBR. Masstige brands can build enduring CMBRs when they become an integral part of a consumer's network and in turn their life. For example, through enabling the consumer to achieve their personal goals, such as self enhancement or social belonging. Masstige brand managers therefore become facilitators of and/or contributors to consumers' identity projects. The more symbolic nature of masstige brands, however, means that consumers'

expectations are higher than for lower/middle mass-market brands and in addition luxury brands where consumers are more content for the brand to be distant and less available (Gurзки et al., 2019; Leahy, 2011). Existing theory suggests consumers have one or two important CBRs in a product category (e.g. Fournier, 1998). Our research, however, demonstrates that consumers can have multiple special relationships in a masstige product category with these relationships ebbing and flowing in salience over time depending on wider socio-cultural factors. This new conceptualisation of CMBRs requires an alternative view from the hierarchical linear view of the brand as a meaning provider to the brand as a collaborator and enabler.

The first section of this article reviews the literature on masstige brands, focusing on what is known about how consumers use masstige brands in the construction of their identity projects. This leads us to the CBR literature to understand the relationships consumers have with brands, before exploring the volatile social context within which CMBRs develop. The second section presents the two-stage methodology used in the study. The third section outlines and discusses the empirical findings. The article concludes by reflecting on the contributions and implications for theory and practice and identifying directions for future.

2. Literature review

2.1. Masstige brands and consumer identity

Consumer researchers have long been aware that CBRs are positioned within social and cultural discourses (e.g. Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Consumers use masstige brands in their identity projects to send status and worthiness signals about who they are and their goals (Granot et al., 2013). This involves consumers going to some trouble to educate themselves about the brands, and what they offer them. Arguably, any brand can be used by consumers in the service of their identity projects (Larsen & Patterson, 2018), with brands providing reasonably reliable, efficient and consistent signalling methods. It is widely recognised that consumers utilise brands as a means of self-expression, with those higher in self-consciousness being more prone to using luxury and masstige brands in their identity projects (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999; Granot et al., 2013). Consuming masstige brands can also gratify a consumer's desire to be unique; allowing them to express their individuality and achievements (Kim et al., 2019), to feel a sense of social belonging (Saavedra & Bautista, 2020), to attain a specific status (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012) or for emotional satisfaction, such as to feel liberated of "a sense of adventure" through consuming the brand (Granot et al., 2013, p. 39).

Consumers are naturally social in nature. Aristotle famously stated: 'Man is a social animal. He cannot survive in isolation'. Many consumers value belonging to a community and simultaneously belong to multiple on- and off-line communities and can identify socially with a group to which they have had no (physical or virtual) contact (Mousavi et al., 2017). Brand communities are a collective of consumption that allow consumers to feel a sense of belonging with one another (Wickstrom et al., 2021). Previous research has explored how consumers utilise masstige brands to impress others, activating what Kim et al. (2019) refer to as a 'taking care of me' dimension. Here, consumers treat themselves or feel a sense of excitement and liberation through association with masstige brands. Social media platforms provide a new stage on which consumers express and promote themselves to a large audience (Correa et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2012), providing "an interface that cajole[s] users into releasing information about themselves, both consciously and unconsciously" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 210). We progress this conversation, seeking to further understand how the presence of others impacts the development of CMBRs. This leads us to the next consideration - the special relationship consumers have with masstige brands, an area that remains embryonic (Paul, 2019).

2.2. Consumer brand relationships

The CBR literature, which draws on interpersonal relationship theories from social psychology (e.g. Fournier, 1998; Kim et al., 2020), argues that the positive relationships that consumers have with brands enhance brand value. Here, the brand is seen as more than a source of identification and it projects emotional dimensions of brand image, brand equity, loyalty and trust into the CBR (e.g., Fournier, 1998; Sweeney & Chew, 2002). It is therefore somewhat inevitable that relational metaphors are pervasive in the CBR literature. The relational metaphors adopted in the extant CBR literature are predominately based on human romantic interpersonal relationships, such as Fournier's (1998, p. 362) 'committed partnerships', which are defined as:

"Long-term, voluntarily imposed, socially supported union high in love, intimacy, trust, and a commitment to stay together despite adverse circumstances. Adherence to exclusivity rules expected"

Fournier (1995), along with Veloutsou (2009) and Wittenbraker et al. (2015) describe the brand as a relational partner. Fournier claims that a brand's ultimate goal is to create a committed relationship with the consumer, where the consumer perceives the brand as irreplaceable. In re-visiting her 1998 research, Fournier (2009) expresses concerns that the study: "myopically fixated on the one type of relationship capable of delivering firm value: the highly committed and affectional laden 'marital' relationship ideal" (p. 9). In focusing on a relationship perspective, an understanding of the nature and essence of CMBRs requires reconsideration and reconceptualisation. The consumer is an active relational partner, not a passive receiver in the CBR dyad (Veloutsou, 2009). As an active agent in the CBR, the consumer co-constructs brand meanings through a dialogue between brands and consumers (O'Reilly, 2005; Schembri, 2009), with: "different consumers construct[ing] multiple meanings" (Berthon et al., 2009, p. 357). The utilisation of relational metaphors can reinforce: "the ideological values of Judeo-Christian marriages" (O'Malley et al., 2008, p. 167), where marriage is perceived as a contractual agreement between a man and woman to remain in an eternal monogamous relationship (Levitt, 1983). This leads to the need to re-explore the relevance of the Judeo-Christian ideology in the context of CMBRs as being eternal, exclusive and singular relationships between a brand and consumer. We set out to determine the relevance of the marriage relational metaphor in the context of CMBRs, exploring the aptness of the metaphor *in the data*, as opposed to imposing the metaphor *onto the data* (cf. Fournier, 1998; Aledin, 2012; Wittenbraker et al., 2015).

CBRs involve different constituents (people and organisations), with whom consumers interact (Keller, 2021). In focusing on CMBRs, we take inspiration from scholars who describe a CBR as a *web* of relationships, and in doing so, distance themselves from the perspective that a CBR is a single channel of communication between the brand and consumer (e.g., Strathern, 1996; Long & Moore, 2013). The typology of relationship they describe is not that of a *monogamous marriage*, rather, it acknowledges that marriage relationships involve other people. Here, marriage is viewed as an evolutionary process that can be renewed, separated or terminated if one or both partners are no longer content in the relationship (McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012). Consumers also change over their life cycle as they transition through life events, such as marriage, remarriages, promotions, new jobs, retirement, moving home, having children, fluctuating incomes and through the volatility of everyday life that can all impact consumers' variety seeking behaviour and purchasing habits (Koschate-Fischer et al., 2018). As consumers' lives evolve, this volatile social environment adds complexities to building and maintaining high quality CMBRs.

2.3. The volatile context of CMBRs

Brand community is a well-established concept in the marketing literature and inspires our understanding of CMBRs (Muniz & O'Guinn,

2001; Schau et al., 2009). McAlexander et al. (2002, p. 38) define a brand community as: "a fabric of relationships in which the consumer is situated". More recently, research has focused on virtual brand communities (Brodie et al., 2013; Veloutsou & Black, 2020), which de Valck et al. (2009, p. 185) define as: "a specialized, non-geographically bound, online community, based on social communications and relationships among a brand's consumers". Consumer engagement in brand communities has been extensively researched (Brodie et al., 2013; Dessart et al., 2015), with community members being found to: develop relationships with one another; to educate and support one another; and/or, to share stories and information about the brand (Schau et al., 2009; Azar et al., 2016; Schembri & Latimer, 2016). Existing research on brand communities has demonstrated that brand relationships are not developed and maintained in a consumer-brand vacuum, with consumer-consumer interactions also having an important role to play. This underlines that CMBRs are: "embedded in a matrix of relationships with others" (i.e., people and organisations) (Strathern, 1996, p. 66). Furthermore, Turkle (2017) indicates how the digital revolution, particularly social media, is significantly impacting the way consumers think about themselves and their interpersonal relationships. In addition, Turkle believes that technology has encouraged us to become more narcissistic in our actions. This is reinforced by Roestenberg (2014) and Vaterlaus et al. (2018), who argue that social media leads individuals to make unhealthy and unrealistic interpersonal relationship comparisons with many individuals curating and filtering their social media image to ignore the mundane parts of life. In other words, through social media, people *use* other people and brands as objects, communicating and interacting on a short-term basis, rather than establishing real relationships. It is, thus, insufficient to analyse a CMBR as a single-channel relationship between the consumer and brand. CMBRs must be viewed as networks of relationships. There is also scarce research on the social media pages of masstige brands, particularly in relation to whether they influence how consumers construct and manage their CMBRs.

The marketing terrain, within which consumers form and maintain masstige and non-masstige brand relationships, is capricious. Many factors contribute to this, including: the transition to more service-based economies; an ageing population; faster product commoditization; escalating global competition; growth in emerging markets; advertising saturation; hyper-connected consumers; and intensified consumer variety-seeking behaviour. All of these aspects operate in a context of rapid and continuous technological and digital advances (Vermesan & Friess, 2015; Koschate-Fischer et al., 2018; Palmatier & Steinhoff, 2019).

The fourth industrial revolution (the global digital change of social life) has brought changes to the nature of contemporary relationships since the seminal CBR work in the 1990s (Blackston, 1992; Fournier, 1998; Palmatier & Steinhoff, 2019). Early CBR literature was developed in a time characterised by milder volatility. We therefore need to explore how CMBRs operate in a time of heightened volatility, exploring the impact that this has on the role of masstige brands in consumers' lives. The internet is a driving factor of the fourth industrial revolution, providing: "interfaces for interaction which are substantively different than those available offline" (Steinmetz, 2012, p.27). Social media is at the heart of this changing marketing landscape (Kizgin et al., 2018), having fast become a platform ingrained in many consumers' lives. This evolving technology, facilitates *inter alia*, self-expression and the potential expression of affection for, and affiliation with, others (Adams, 2015; de Vries et al., 2017). Social media allows consumers to become more interactive with brands, shifting marketing power towards the consumer (Berthon et al., 2009). Brands can utilise social media to develop brand communities of interested and committed consumers, where consumers get to know and interact with one another and the brand, which can improve and strengthen CBRs (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Barreda et al., 2015). Wang et al. (2012), also recognise the important role of brands' social media pages in connecting consumers with peers to generate more interest in the brand. There is, however, an

under-developed awareness of the role social media plays in CMBRs, particularly how consumers interact with masstige brands on social media and how a ‘sense of community’ is developed between members of a masstige brand community (Rodrigues & Rodrigues, 2019; Kumar et al., 2020). Therefore, our research, having identified a dearth of research involving CMBRs in physical and digital contexts, seeks to rectify these lacunae.

Social media platforms are a key channel in facilitating social interactions and connecting consumers to one another and to brands (Liang et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2012). An area that has received little attention in the literature is the dialogue that online brand communities allow between consumers and the brand (Simon & Tossan, 2018). A further shortcoming of previous research, is that it has failed to recognise: “brands as social actors endowed with a relational agency” (Simon & Tossan, 2018, p. 176). Simon and Tossan highlight that consumers seek to experience a sense of intimacy with their brands, with one way of this developing being through interactions on social media. Social interactions are vital for consumers to feel a sense of belonging and support in the brand relationship, with brands needing to nurture a supportive online community to improve the quality of CBRs (Liang et al., 2011). Lim and Kumar (2019) note that online brand communities comprise a range of participants from brand loyalists to brand haters, with brands needing to identify target audiences to develop strategies to satisfy their varying needs. They also reaffirm the work of Algesheimer et al. (2005), that the relationship a consumer has with a brand determines the relationship they have with the brand community, with commitment to online brand communities reinforcing consumers’ existing CBRs.

Further research is now required to understand the dynamic and increasingly fragmented branding landscape within which CMBRs are navigated (Dollet et al., 2017). Further understanding of the role of masstige brands in consumers’ lives is required, and how such relationships develop over time. This leads us to our primary research question, as previously stated: how do consumers construct and manage their contemporary CMBRs? In addressing this question, we seek to gain insight into the relationships consumers have with masstige brands, and the impact of the wider context on the CMBRs.

3. Methodology

The methodology employed an inductive approach to theory building (see Woiceshyn & Daellenbach, 2018) and comprised two stages of data collection. The first stage involved 15 in-depth interviews to explore how consumers construct and manage their CMBRs. The second stage involved an online content analysis of 15 masstige brands’ social media communities to better understand the role of social media in CMBRs.

3.1. Stage one: Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with 15 participants (see Table 1). This is consistent with previous studies that have explored masstige and luxury brand relationships in-depth and/or conducted a two-stage study (e.g., Roper et al., 2013; Purohit & Radia, 2022) and research on data saturation of qualitative interviews (Henink & Kaiser, 2021). The interviews focused on the brands for which participants declared a strong preference and loyalty. Participants were able to discuss any brand within the interview with which they considered themselves to have a relationship. Masstige brands were then identified during the data analysis stage using Paul’s (2015; 2019) Masstige Mean Scale (MMS) - a widely used and comprehensive model for measuring the value of masstige brands (Baber et al., 2020). Paul’s MMS contains 10 factors against which the masstige value of competing brands can be measured. We classified participants’ CBRs as CMBRs where they met the following characteristics:

Table 1
Participant Overview.

Pseudonym	Gender	Year Born	Occupation	Brands discussed in depth (*brand selected for stage two)
Amanda	Female	1986	Teacher	Fat Face*; Missoma; British Airways
Ben	Male	1985	Business Manager	Apple; BMW; Nike; Paul Smith*
Callum	Male	1982	Actuary	Apple; Starbucks; Tesla*
Danielle	Female	1988	Postgraduate Student	Clarins*; Apple; BMW
Emma	Female	1990	Writer	Tatty Devine*; Cambridge Satchel Company;
Fiona	Female	1992	Data Analyst	Uber; Pets at Home; Burberry; Jo Malone*; Jo Loves
Gemma	Female	1991	Personal Assistant	MINI*; Mulberry; Chanel; Apple
Harriet	Female	1989	Content Executive	Levi’s*; Boots Ritz-Carlton Hotels
Isaac	Male	1990	Sales Assistant	Volkswagen*; Belvedere Vodka
Jane	Female	1987	HR Manager	Starbucks*; ASOS; Method
Katie	Female	1991	Unemployed	Vans*; Apple; Disney
Liam	Male	1979	Accountant	Apple*; Bang and Olufsen
Mark	Male	1967	Solicitor	Jaguar*; Apple
Natalie	Female	1958	Retired	Barbour*; Audi; Hilton Hotels
Oliver	Male	2001	Trainee Accountant	Ray-Ban*; Polo Ralph Lauren; Calvin Klein

- a high level of brand knowledge (including brand awareness and brand image);
- bought the brand because of its mass prestige;
- recommended the brand to peers (including family and/or friends);
- paid a higher price for the brand for *status quo*;
- a close relationship to the brand (i.e. it was top-of-mind);
- considered the brand to be of superior quality;
- not perceived price to be the determining factor when purchasing the brand’s products/services;
- considered there to be excitement in the relationship with the brand;
- felt the brand was superior to other brands;
- considered that others in the wider community perceive the brand as prestigious.

The participants, as shown in Table 1, were aged between 19 and 62, with six male and nine female participants. Three initial participants were contacted online (via social media), with snowball sampling then used where these participants were asked to recommend others to participate in the study. An initial briefing then took place to ensure that all participants were able to provide rich insights into how they constructed their relationships with various brands. The average interview was approximately-two hours in length with interviews ranging between 90 and 274 min in duration. This varied depending on factors such as the number of brands discussed and length of the CBRs.

3.2. Stage two: Social media brand communities content analysis

The interview data demonstrated that social media played an influential role in shaping participants’ CMBRs. A second stage of data collection was therefore undertaken that involved the researchers immersing themselves in the social media communities of 15 brands to better understand how social media shapes contemporary CMBRs. The 15 masstige brands were selected from those identified during the stage one interviews (see Table 1). These 15 brands were then tracked across their active public social media platforms that allowed for two-way consumer-brand and consumer-consumer dialogue. The platforms included were: *Facebook*; *Instagram*; *Twitter*; *YouTube* and *TikTok*. The

decision to exclude *Snapchat* was taken as it does not allow for the public viewing of comments on brands' posts.

Researchers must immerse themselves in the online community, learning its rules and norms (Reilly & Trevisan, 2016). The 15 brands' social media pages were therefore initially observed for one month to learn the 'rules' and norms of each community and to ensure they would provide sufficient insight to address the research question. The next step was to collect the data, which was done over a six month period. Here, each social media platform was observed, on average twice a week. Data that provided insight into how consumers construct and manage their CMBRs were collected from the consumer-brand and consumer-consumer interactions on the social media pages of the 15 brands. The data predominantly came from the brands' original posts and comments beneath these posts but also included public tweets and Instagram posts where the brand had been publicly tagged by a consumer.

3.3. Data analysis

Data collected from the interviews and online content analysis were analysed on NVivo using thematic analysis as set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). The interview data were coded initially using descriptive and in vivo coding that reflected the data (see Sapsford & Jupp, 1996; Saldaña, 2021). Pattern coding was then used in the second round of coding to group the initial codes into meaningful meta-codes that identified emergent themes in the data (Tuckett, 2005; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2021). Each code represented something of significance regarding how consumers construct and manage their CMBRs. After carrying out and analysing 11 interviews, no new codes emerged, reinforcing the appropriateness of the stage one sample size.

In stage two, the brand-consumer, consumer-consumer and consumer-brand-consumer interactions on the comments of over 5000 social media posts across the 15 brands' social media communities were analysed using thematic content analysis. There was overlap in the codes generated in the interviews, however, new codes emerged in relation to the online dynamic of CMBRs. No new codes emerged from the data in relation to the online landscape of CMBRs after analysing the social media pages of 12 of the brand communities. The data in stage two, similarly to stage one, were also coded in two cycles on NVivo, with the first cycle of coding using descriptive and in vivo coding, with codes derived from the data itself in relation to how consumers construct and manage their CMBRs. The second cycle of coding then used pattern coding to refine and categorise the first cycle codes into meaningful units of analysis to identify themes in the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2021). We consider a theme to capture: "something important about the data in relation to the research question, and [to] represent some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). The themes from both stage one and two were reviewed and refined to ensure that each theme is reflective of the data.

3.4. Verification and trustworthiness

To ensure our findings are an accurate reflection of the research phenomena we applied Guba and Lincoln's (1989) four criteria for evaluating qualitative research, as recommended by Sumrin and Gupta (2021): credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility relates to connecting the research findings to reality and establishing their trustworthiness (Merriam, 1998). We employed member checks at various points during the data collection and analysis, which Guba and Lincoln (1989, p. 239) argue are: "the single most critical technique for establishing credibility". For example, during the interviews, statements made by participants were repeated back to them or summarised by the interviewer to clarify understanding. Peer checking of the data was also used to review the accuracy of the codes and in turn the themes, to "increase credibility by checking categories developed out of the data" (Krefting, 1991, p. 219). This ensured the

data were analysed appropriately, and themes were driven inductively from the data. Peer checking revealed a high accuracy in the themes, with two discrepancies noted, both in relation to the terminology used in sub-themes. These suggestions were reviewed and consequently two sub-themes were retitled to ensure closer reflection of the data. It is also important to demonstrate the transferability of the research. We therefore provide details of participants taking part in the study (see Table 1) and the data collection methods to facilitate the reader in contextualising the findings and their suitability to other situations (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The dependability of findings was ensured through the use of two data collection methods, with member and peer checks, as highlighted earlier, also providing further verification of the dependability of the findings. Finally, confirmability, a key criterion where the researcher acknowledges their own predispositions (Miles & Huberman, 1994), was addressed through the researchers remaining open-minded and neutral throughout. Member and peer checks also ensured that conclusions and interpretations were derived from the data, with direct quotes used in the findings to further ensure confirmability (Cope, 2014).

4. Results and discussion

In this section we provide an overview of the three pivotal themes that emerged during the data analysis (see Table 2). Next, we explore each of these three themes and their nine sub-themes, before concluding with a discussion of contemporary CMBRs that emerged in our findings.

4.1. The ambivalent nature of CMBRs

Participants wanted, and actively sought relationships with masstige brands. In stage one, participants expressed feelings of loyalty towards masstige brands, such as dependence, satisfaction, reliance and trust (Fournier & Yao, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Sweeney & Chew, 2002; Alagarsamy et al., 2021). Our findings, therefore, demonstrate the importance of loyalty in CMBRs:

Danielle [Interview; Clarins]: *When I switch from one product to another I go to Clarins, so like to Boots or to Debenhams where they have Clarins counters and I actually ask them, it [Clarins] just became the place that I would always go to for skincare products, I didn't consider anywhere else, everywhere else was inferior.*

Gemma [Interview; MINI]: *I stuck with it, so I kept going back to it and didn't want to consider other brands that could maybe even offer you a better deal.*

Liam [Interview; Apple]: *When it came to getting my next phone upgrade I kept on buying Apple phones as I kind of, well I became more and more dependent on them.*

Katie [Interview; Vans]: *I've worn them, my best friends' worn them, so, you know it was like the done thing, because we wore them and there was like a period where they were like really in fashion so it was kind of more acceptable then to wear them as most people were wearing them. And I think that, you know that was good and I got used to the brand and liked it so continued to buy it as it never let me down.*

This was not the enduring loyalty that previous research has shown for CBRs (see Fournier, 1998; Park et al., 2010) - participants did not commit to nurturing a long-term bond with the brand. The participants used non-committal language when referring to masstige brands, anticipating that their connection to the brand would expire in the future. Our data, therefore, illustrates the need to step away from the traditional Judeo-Christian view that strong CMBRs are akin to enduring marriages. This is seen in participants being more vociferous about the existence of an expiration date on their CMBR, with this being more intense than their discussions of CBRs with luxury and/or lower/middle market brands during the interviews. The participants articulated that they would continue to associate themselves with the masstige brand only if it continued to serve a valuable purpose to them to do so:

Table 2
Overview of Findings.

Main theme	Sub-theme(s)	Overview
Ambivalent nature of CMBRs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Non-exclusive 2. Non-committal 3. Feeling special 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Brands participants felt a strong sense of loyalty towards were described as their preferred brand, not exclusive. 2. Participants reflected on the ephemeral nature of their CMBRs, projecting that the CMBR would have an expiration date and on previous CMBRs. 3. Participants wanted the brand to make them feel appreciated and valued.
Complex CMBR landscape	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Unstable and fluid <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Beautifully imperfect 2. Personal resource constraints 3. Physical and digital networks 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Participants constructed their CMBR to be turbulent with highs and lows. They did not expect a flawless relationship with the brand, reflecting that if the brand were 'perfect' they'd be sceptical of its authenticity. 2. Personal resource constraints, such as time and/or money influence the development of strong CMBRs. Participants remembered being swayed by cheaper and/or more convenient brands. Such experiences pushed many participants closer to the masstige brand, minimising future switching behaviour. 3. CMBRs are a network of relationships between the consumer, the brand, family, peers, celebrities and other brands that take place on- and off-line.
Presence of "others"	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Social context: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Significant others o Social media 2. Co-presence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Digital co-presence 3. Self-concept <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Social belonging o Self-approval 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There are a myriad of players influencing the development of CMBRs, including family, peers and celebrities. Social media plays a key part in allowing these players to interact. 2. CMBRs are embedded in a complex network of relationships (e.g., family, peers, the brand, other brands and celebrities). The presence and interactions with others shaped participants' CMBRs. 3. Participants reflected that the brand fulfilled their needs to feel a sense of belonging with others (e.g. peers) or to increase their self-esteem and self-confidence (self-approval).

Liam [Interview; Apple]: *Will I always buy Apple? Who knows, probably not, I know I'll get to a point where there might be something better out there for me.*

Jane [Interview; Nike]: *I'm not going to be a 60-year-old wearing Nike stuff. I don't want to be that person, that Grandma that's trying too hard to be like a 20 odd year old.*

Natalie [Interview; Barbour]: *Since I was about 10 I guess [since first owned brand], my parents always said they lasted and they really do. In the future I'll probably find another brand, for now it's great, who knows? ...you can't say you'll always buy a brand you don't know what other brands there will be, better brands you find.*

Isaac [Interview; Volkswagen]: *They work for me now but not always, if we have kids then we might get a different car, a Volvo or Rav4 [Toyota] they're good family cars.*

Participants' CMBRs were not that of a perfect 'happily ever after' fairy tale marriage relationship as depicted in previous research on

committed CBRs (e.g. [Fournier, 1998](#)). Moreover, participants' CMBRs were not exclusive. They described the brand as a preferred brand, but not the only brand they would purchase and connect with - the brand had to serve a purpose. When the participant perceived that the brand had stopped serving a purpose, or it became too difficult for the participant to purchase the brand, then they were not afraid to purchase alternative brands. This further reinforced the need to step away from the traditional Judeo-Christian ideal of marriage.

Ben [Interview; Samsung]: *I really like their [Samsung] washing machines, freezers and TV's and I would consider their phone if I felt it was better for me, but I'm happy with Apple at the moment, the Apps are way better than Android.*

Isaac [Interview; Volkswagen]: *Yeah, like I'll buy, if it's available, I will buy real Volkswagen parts, but if it's not I will buy the next best thing.*

Participants' CMBRs were ambivalent in nature. Participants constructed their CMBRs to be turbulent with highs and lows - they did not expect a seamless relationship with the brand. A few participants even asserted that a problem-free relationship would lead them to perceive the brand as inauthentic - a characteristic of great importance to them.

Emma [Interview; Tatty Devine] *I know it's there when I'm going to need it, it's not always perfect, but hey whoever is 24/7.*

Interviewer: Do you have any examples where perhaps they haven't been perfect?

Emma: *A couple of times really. They sent me the wrong necklace and I actually preferred the one they sent and asked to keep it and they let me even though it was more expensive.*

Oliver [Interview; Ray-Ban]: *I got the wrong order once, but they put it right and you know that mistakes happen. They sent the right order out straight away once I complained before I returned the ones they'd sent which shows they trusted me.*

The nature of participants' CMBRs were unstable. Participants recognised their CMBRs to be ephemeral and fluid in nature. This links to Bardhi and Eckhardt's research (2017) on liquid versus solid consumption. Participants recognised that their CMBRs were capricious in nature, with participants constructing their CMBR to have an expiration date. Our findings, however, are not consistent with two of [Bardhi and Eckhardt's \(2017\)](#) primary characteristics of liquid consumption: *access* and *dematerialisation*. Participants valued ownership and possession of the brands' products and services, preferring physical products and tangible elements to services (e.g. luxury toiletries in a hotel room). Participants wanted, and valued interactions with the brand, with their CMBRs blurring the lines between liquid and solid consumption.

Emma [Interview; Tatty Devine]: *So sometimes I have bought me it as a birthday present or as a Christmas present or if I've got a new job or a promotion or something and it really does feel like a good a really good treat and a present to yourself rather than just here is something I just bought online and it's in a cardboard box, and it feels boring and not as special.*

Harriet [Interview; Ritz-Carlton]: *Everything's more luxury, the shampoos, the bedding, the tea and coffee, it's nicer than hotels where you get hard pillows and cheap shower gel that makes your skin feel dry.*

Gemma [Interview; MINI]: *I've had so many amazing experiences with MINI, like growing up and now I've never felt disappointed in them and I love that you can really personalise your MINI which I don't think you can really do as much with other cars, so it's all the experiences and the fun I've had with the brand that drive me to it.*

The participants had high expectations for masstige brands, expected the brand to make them feel special and valued when they required it to do so. Some participants suggested that when the brand made them feel appreciated, it led to them feel closer and more loyal towards the brand and, in turn, they were willing to pay a higher price to acquire the brands' products or services.

Emma [Interview; Tatty Devine]: *It felt like, like they were pleased that you liked what they had created and they were pleased that you had chosen to part with your money and appreciated that you'd done it with them. Yeah, it was like they were really thanking me and that made me feel really happy that they appreciated it and me and it made me want to buy more from them as it was different and of course the product itself was really nice.*

GM [Facebook; Paul Smith - post about what makes you happy]: *Paul Smith customer services managing to find an item for me from a collection from years ago to replace after my dog chewed it. That made me happy the best customer service team in the world - thank you [6 likes].*

However, this only went so far. Participants projected that if the CMBR became too much effort for them, or, if they perceived the brand to have stopped caring about them as an individual, or equally if matters of critical importance to them (e.g., sustainability, staff welfare) emerged, they would search for an alternative brand that could better meet their needs.

Fiona [Interview; Burberry]: *Did you know they burn their old clothes and stock? I couldn't believe it, who does that? I'm never buying or wearing anything from them again.*

Interviewer: You have a lot of Burberry clothes?

Fiona: *Yes, I love, well-loved their coats, bags and wallets and even the perfume, I gave them all to my local charity shop, I want nothing to do with it [Burberry].*

Jane [Interview; Starbucks]: *I don't go near them [Starbucks] after all the scandals, it's not an option. I'd rather not get a coffee, I'll go to Nero now or any other [coffee shop] just not them.*

This was also seen on the brands' social media pages. Followers had written comments on the brands' posts or tagged them in public personal posts telling the brand, their social network and other brand followers that they were dissatisfied and calling on the brand to take action.

RS [Instagram; Apple - commenting on unrelated post]: *Pllssss bring fortnite back to Appstore.*

NM [Facebook; Paul Smith - commenting on an unrelated post of a celebrity wearing the brand]: *Who cares what over-paid [sic], over-funded celebrities wear, they are not the barometer of what is ok! I used to live [sic] Paul Smith, not anymore sorry if this is negative, just I bet he never even paid for it!*

NG [Facebook; Paul Smith - commenting on post relating to International Day of Happiness]: *This isn't good marketing- it's taking the P**S out of young people with mental health problems/ PS you need to change your marketing company.*

NN [Facebook; Paul Smith - commenting on a post stating a sale had started online]: *If you're gonna send a sale email out, at least make sure your website can handle it. I added one thing to basket and you've got the "we are upgrading" website message. Shabby show.*

In some instances, the brand engaged the follower in conversation to resolve the issue or to let them know their comment had been taken onboard. In some instances, individuals felt pleased and valued that the brand had taken time to interact with them to try and resolve the issue (s).

IC [Instagram; Barbour - commenting on an unrelated post]: *what can I do with static on my waxed jacket? Its [sic] like a like magnet!!☐.*

Barbour: *Hi there, thank you for your message and for bringing this to our attention. We are sorry to hear that you have experienced this with your waxed jacket. ... We can only recommend to use a standard lint roller or alternatively another trick is to try rubbing the jacket down with a wet rubber glove. I hope this information is helpful to you. If you need any further assistance, please contact our care team at customer.care@barbour.com.*

Best wishes, The Barbour Team.

IC: *thanks [sic] you, I will try with the rubber globe.*

In contrast, sometimes the brands' replies came across as inauthentic. This left many consumers feeling that the brand had brushed off their question or comment with a generalised response.

SL [Twitter; Clarins - tweet tagging brand with image of a lot of packaging for a small product]: *this "Clarins loved nature" bag misses the point by arriving in a plastic bag no indication if bag is biodegradable or recyclable, such waste. Didn't ask for the bag, don't need it.*

Clarins [replying to SL tweet]: *Hi there, thank you for your tweet, and we do apologise for the delay as we were speaking with our Warehouse Team. The bags are made from up to 90 % recycled plastic and are fully recyclable after use.*

SL [replying to Clarins]: *Thanks, recyclable where? With what type of plastics? There is no indication on it and most councils don't accept soft plastics like this.*

Clarins [replying to SL tweet]: *This material used is fully recyclable and can be widely recycled, however we do usually recommend to check with your local recycling centre for more details on specifics. We hope this helps and please let us know should you have any further queries.*

Brands face a difficult decision in deciding how to respond and interact with consumers online when they raise concerns. To come across as caring and wanting to engage with consumers with personalised responses takes time and effort - each response needs careful consideration to ensure it is not over-generalised and solves the problem. In other instances, where the brand had not responded to an individual's comment, this often led to them feeling frustrated and undervalued. In several instances this led to individuals posting multiple times (often the same message) to feel heard and to try to evoke a response from the brand.

RR [Facebook; Paul Smith - commenting on four unrelated posts]: *I am so disappointed with the quality of the Paul Smith Jacket...that I bought and after one time wash it has changed to a smaller size! I can't wear it anymore! And Paul smith [sic] does nothing about it! I want refund or exchange! It's totally not fair! However they don't care and they said it's not refundable or exchange mainly because it was a discounted item. So disappointed!*

Our findings reveal instances in which participants claim love, shared knowledge and deep mutual understanding with the brand. Here, CMBRs were described in classical relationship terms, such as spending time together, providing care through practical acts of consumption and demonstrating affection.

Danielle [Interview; Clarins]: *Yeah I think I do as that was like genuine and even now I think I am being genuine as I really think that I do love Clarins, I have very strong feelings towards it and I love the products.*

Callum [Interview; Apple]: *...you know if there is a problem you can go in and they will very quickly fix it and when like me you are completely reliant on their products that counts for a lot actually.*

Mark [Interview; Jaguar]: *They really really do care. They take time to get to know me and listen to what I want, I've not experienced that before with a car brand.*

CMBRs have elements of 'marriage' as highlighted above, however, they should not be conceptualised as enduring and monogamous marriage relationships. Contrary to the idealistic description of marriage as an eternal and stable relationship, our participants described their CMBRs as intense, transient and unstable, sharing moments where they were navigating and negotiating multiple and simultaneous masstige brand relationships, often within the same product category. For example, Fiona discussed navigating CMBR with multiple perfume brands, including Jo Loves and Jo Malone.

Fiona [Interview; Perfume]: *My favourite probably is Jo Malone. I've a little shelf of them [perfume bottles] and love having them out and the bottles matching in a row with some Chanel ones on another shelf then*

others like Jo Loves oh and my favourite a bottle of Le Labo, that is really special, it was my wedding perfume.

Fiona not only admits to 'playing the field' with masstige perfume brands, but embraces this multiplicity, feeling happy and content with the cocktail of brands she has created.

4.2. Navigating the complex CMBR landscape

Our findings demonstrate that the environment within which consumers navigate their CMBRs is complex and fluid. The brands towards which consumers expressed a preference and loyalty did not have an 'exclusive status' in participants' lives. For example, participants recollected that their personal resource constraints, such as time and/or money influenced the development of their CMBR. Changes in personal resource constraints led to changes in purchase behaviour and were often driven by wider life events in the participants' lives (Koschate-Fischer et al., 2018). Participants reconstructed times where they had been swayed by cheaper and/or more convenient brands when personal resources were restricted, and they could not acquire their preferred brand. The importance of these instances were recognised by participants. They reflected that their experiences with other brands had pushed them closer to the masstige brand, when the substitute brand did not live up to the experiences they had had with the previous brand or failed to meet their expectations. Consequently, they wanted to minimise switching behaviour in the future by finding alternative ways to obtain proximity to the masstige brand.

Ben [Interview; Paul Smith]: *I bought a T M Lewin suit, and it was because I couldn't find a Paul Smith suit that, for, well for a reasonable price.... When I got a bit of extra money that [a Paul Smith suit] was the first thing I bought, I didn't consider spending it on anything else.*

Fiona [Interview; Jo Malone]: *We bought a house then got engaged a couple of months after, so money was really stretched saving for everything and a car so I bought the Aldi dupe ones. They were alright I suppose but the scent didn't last and they didn't burn the same.*

Interviewer: That's interesting, have you bought them again then?

Fiona: *The Aldi ones? No, only mainly Jo Malone and the odd other brand like The White Company's ones when they're on offer but Jo Malone are my go to for candles.*

Convenience was also a factor that drove participants back to the brand. Where participants considered the brand was serving them well, they felt it was more convenient to continue the CMBR than to invest time trying alternative masstige brands.

Katie [Interview; Apple]: *Well, it, I would probably buy a product just because it is Apple, and you know I wouldn't have to do much, kind of research into it.*

Amanda [Interview; Fat Face]: *I know what I'm getting, the quality is generally good and it's easy to buy from them as I know what size I am and don't have to fuff around measuring my hips or chest to check things are the right size for me.*

Lifestyle also had an impact on the CMBR. Where participants were leading busy lifestyles, juggling work, hectic social lives and family commitments, convenience was also important. Participants expressed that their lifestyle caused them to be impatient, causing them to want to access the brand on their terms and as soon as possible.

Callum [Interview; Apple]: *...it's becoming more and more important that a brand like Apple locates where its customers are, if you're like me and work full-time you struggle otherwise, and in this day and age you want a new product straight away.*

Harriet [Interview; Boots]: *...you can get everything in the same place. That's what I wanted, a place where I could pop in and it had everything and it'd save me time having to go to a few places.*

This was also observed in the online masstige brand communities.

Members wanted to know instantly when new products were available or to have an answer to an issue, such as stock availability.

LC [Instagram; Apple - comment on unrelated post]: *NO IOS 14 UPDATE AND IT IS 6:04 UK TIME ZONE WHATS HAPPING [sic].*

DJ [Instagram; Apple - comment on unrelated post]: *Just sitting here constantly refreshing my settings waiting for the update haha.*

MRFV [Instagram; Apple - comment on unrelated post]: *People need patience. Lots of it. The update will come soon, go and play some video games or read a book meanwhile.*

AD [TikTok; Vans - comment on post]: *hey vans, when u guys planning on restocking the uv flower dot vans? It better be soon [smiley face emoji] [8 likes].*

KC [reply to AD comment]: *Hey vans I second this opinion. I am completely devastated. I will give y'all all my money I want these shoes so badly [4 likes].*

YY [reply to AD; KC comments]: *They restocked a few sizes today [1 like].*

In some instances other followers got involved in the discussion, telling those who had commented to have more patience or helping by answering questions on behalf of the brand. This further demonstrates that CMBRs are a network of physical and digital consumer-brand and consumer-consumer relationships, moving beyond the traditional consumer-brand dyad favoured in the existing literature (e.g., Fournier, 1998; Japutra et al., 2014).

A key aspect of CMBRs is that there needs to be an advantage to the consumer and their self-concept in continuing the relationship. All participants constructed that the brand either provided them with a sense of belonging and/or provided self-approval. This is consistent with the work of Sirgy and Johar (1999), who found that there are multiple types of self-image to which a brand can connect including a consumer's actual self, social self, and/or ideal self. It also demonstrates how consumers use masstige brands to navigate their identity projects and to send signals about who they are (Granot et al., 2013; Das et al., 2022).

Katie [Interview; Apple]: *I suppose it's just a brand that is fairly cool and trendy, all the products they do look good and you know what you're getting and for me anyway it's nice not to be the odd one out and I think Apple I don't know I think, well yeah you kind of belong when you use an Apple product and it kind of makes you feel good about yourself.*

Issac [Interview; Volkswagen]: *It was a bit different and stood out as being a bit expensive compared to like all the Fords and stuff that everyone else was getting into, it felt great.*

Natalie [Interview; Barbour]: *I buy for it to last, it looks good, makes me feel good, I'm proud to wear it. I've chosen something that's timeless, every-one likes Barbour and it's practical for horse riding, dog walking then going out for lunch it just has it all.*

Gemma [Interview; MINI]: *I feel attached to MINI, I feel like it is a part of who I am, MINI helps me to be who I am if that makes sense, like when I drive it I feel really confident and I feel like who I want to be.*

4.3. The presence of others

A sense of intimacy with the brand and the brand sociality grew through the participants' time with the brand and the presence of other consumers. Participants not only chose to bring the brand itself into their lives, but in many instances, enjoyed interacting with fellow brand followers. This supports the work of Veloutsou (2009) and Wallace et al. (2014), who found that consumers with strong affective feelings towards a brand are more likely to engage with the brand (and other individuals who also share an interest in the brand) in physical and/or digital contexts. Our findings also echo the work of Goffman (1963), who introduced the concept of 'co-presence' to describe how the presence of other actors shapes individual experience and links macro- and micro-theorising about social interaction. Research on virtual brand communities challenges classic co-presence assumptions, recognising that

people no longer have to be in physical proximity to socialise around a brand. Our findings demonstrate that it is critical to take digital co-presence into account in conceptualising CMBRs, and highlights the complexity of co-presence in CMBRs, with consumers interacting directly with the brand physically and digitally, whilst also managing interactions with other consumers, be that fellow brand followers, friends or family.

SC [Facebook; Jaguar - comment on post about the new E-PACE]: @MH this is what I ordered.

MH [replying to SC]: That's gorgeous can't wait to come up to go for a cruise x.

PK [Instagram; Tatty Devine - comment on post with video]: I'm weirdly pleased to discover you use my favourite glue. Although it's not quite as weird as the realisation that I have a favourite glue! [1 like].

MMA [replying to PK]: @PK What glue is she using? I've watched the reel loads and I can't figure it out ☐ xx [1 like].

PK [replying to MMA]: @MMA it's called Serious Glue, it's superb [1 like].

MMA [replying to PK]: @PK Thank you so much ☐.

Tatty Devine [replying to PK]: @PK If there is one place it's not weird to have a favourite glue, this is it ☐ [1 like].

Ben [Interview; Paul Smith]: ...after a few weeks of probably wearing the suit afterwards, and getting a few comments at work and things like that, that I thought this is obviously clearly good for me...when I have told people that this is a Paul Smith suit, every-one has been like, 'oh really, okay, wow!' and that made me feel really good about myself.

CMBRs are not a single channel between two people - there are a myriad of players. CMBRs are somewhat of a community affair, with consumers sharing brand 'moments' with their network on- and off-line. Significant others, such as peers, family and celebrities, particularly impacted the development of participants' CMBRs. Further to this, and building on the work of [Kim et al. \(2019\)](#), participants drew on masstige brands to impress others, with our findings illustrating how interactions with others are critical to the development of CMBRs. In the interview data, we observed that physical social interactions were key drivers early on in the development of CMBRs. Most participants had become aware and acquainted with the brand through significant others.

Callum [Interview; Apple]: ...lots of friends and colleagues they've always been sort of glued to their phones and they really recommended it and kept showing me things on it and I thought it looked interesting, I suppose I felt a bit left out as most people were starting to own them at that point too.

Isaac [Interview; Volkswagen]: Grandma and Grandad had one, when I was a kid...I was probably about, I don't know about five or six and I remember it being like a great car.

Our data demonstrate the importance of acknowledging multiplicity and recognising that at the heart of CMBRs are the relationships between the consumer, the brand, other consumers and other brands ([Keller, 2021](#)). Social approval from peers, including those in and out of participants' social circles, were an influencing factor in participant's decisions to consume (or not consume) particular brands. For many participants, it was important to associate themselves with brands to feel a sense of social belonging and acceptance with significant others ([Wickstrom et al., 2021](#)). Many participants also emphasised the element of co-presence and how this gave them a sense of belonging and security, explaining that this need to 'fit in' stemmed from past experiences and was a driving factor in them choosing to develop a relationship with a certain brand that they felt was 'safe'. This was not a critical factor in all participants' CMBRs, however, a few were drawn to lesser known brands that they saw as more unique ([Das et al., 2022](#)), discussing how they actively avoided brands they saw as too popular and mainstream. This affirms the research of [Kastanakis and Balabanis' \(2012\)](#), which finds that luxury bandwagon consumption is connected to individuals with an interdependent rather than independent self-

concept.

Liam [Interview; Apple]: It's a "cool brand" [air quotes], you don't feel embarrassed to own it, it's like you almost belong in the in group if you use Apple products, no one would look down on you...I think it goes back to secondary school, I remember that my mum sent me to school with an unbranded black rucksack whilst all of my friends had like Nike and Adidas bags, I remember feeling like really conscious about it, trying to hide my bag and I suppose it like stems from there really, you know trying to fit in.

Jane [Interview; ASOS]: I heard about ASOS actually from like Julia at uni and she was like really fashionable, so in terms of like word of mouth, people tend to recommend them quite a lot and I think that they have like a strong online presence, that people always comment on things and stuff. And you know with places like Boohoo and stuff it's like no one has ever recommended them to me, and I just think that if I am going to buy from you online it is you know, it is almost always a bit risky, especially when they don't have like the online presence that ASOS have.

Emma [Interview; Tatty Devine]: I would say I seek out a lot of brands not that aren't mainstream just because I don't know, for convenience I guess. I still like to wear some mainstream stuff but I might not wear them in the same way as every-one else. I make them me, with like my jewellery. And also yeah you still want to add your stamp to it, you still want to be an individual even if you are wearing like Primark or Topshop or something.

Digitally mediated co-presence played a role in the development of participants' CMBRs, allowing them to get to know more about the brand and become part of the brands' online community ([Simon & Tossan, 2018](#)). The role of online communities in the development of CMBRs was intense. Participants were navigating multiple online communities, interacting and developing digital relationships with the brand, other consumers and other brands. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok were used by participants to interact directly with the brand (e.g., asking questions or as a source of knowledge to learn about new products and events) or indirectly (e.g., with other consumers of the brand or with friends and family who were also interested in the brand).

Jane [Interview; Method cleaning products]: I was randomly scrolling on Facebook and saw a random post commenting about everyday cleaning products and what's in them and I went on from there to seeing that oh god there's loads of like chemicals in like Fairy and you know in like cleaning products, and that's been like a massive work in progress at home, as I have to get the family on board with it. So yeah it kind of spiralled, like with one after the other, and like I follow loads of like blogs and things on Facebook and Instagram, there is loads of things out there that are like the Hippy Homemaker and Wellness.

Emma [Interview; Tatty Devine]: I once got a really good haul, and I got a few pieces I really liked and they've also set up like a Facebook group where you can swap pieces with each other, so if you have pieces you don't want to keep you can swap them.

Interviewer: Have you done that?

Emma: Yeah so I did a swap with someone for a necklace and that was really nice as well. So the one that I got I knew I wouldn't get as much wear out of and I thought it's not really me so I put a picture of it on and someone saw it and she had something that I really wanted and yeah that was really nice so we messaged each other and swapped them.

Natalie [Interview; Barbour]: Their Instagram is really nice, really authentic and homely with real people not just models and I've asked questions about things like what is the jacket in a photo and they've answered, it's really great more brands need to follow their example it's more authentic, they seem to care.

Individuals took to the brands' social media pages to gain knowledge of the brand, or to engage in conversation with the brand and/or individuals associated with the brand. Social media facilitates consumers in connecting with the brand, with other consumers having a pivotal

role to play in developing and maintaining the brand communities of interested consumers on brands' social media pages (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Wang et al., 2012). An example of this is on Apple's Instagram account where posts are predominately made up of user generated content, which often sparks conversations between followers, be that about a shared passion or love of the brands' products.

ELJ [Instagram; Apple - post of a video taken on an iPhone whilst surfing]: *Who dares to take their iPhone while surfing* ☐♂ ☐.

BHM [reply to ELJ]: *iP68 water resistance capable of 1.5 m underwater.*

AxisGO [reply to ELJ]: *one who uses the AxisGO.*

ELJ [reply to AxisGO]: *that's awesome!! Great gadget* ☐.

ELJ [reply to BHM]: *Yup. I own a 12 Pro Max, but can't lose it* ☐☐.

SS [Instagram; Apple - unrelated post]: *World best phone apple* ☐.

TRB [replying to SS]: *yess* ☐☐.

IP [replying to SS]: *samsung holds the world record for most popular smartphone yearly, and most of apple's phones are pretty much carbon copies of each other with extremely minor differences. like the iphone 12 is just an iphone 11 with a blocky design.*

AF [replying to IP]: *true.*

FF [replying to IP]: *same can be said about Samsung. The S20 and S21 aren't that different. Other than the camera bump.*

AN [replying to IP]: *Ok.*

J [replying to SS]: *best? No. Great? Yes.*

AFS [replying to FF]: *you should have thought before typing this* ☐... *Go and check the design.*

FF [replying to AFS]: *Yeah I checked the camera bump is the only difference.*

The content on brands' social media pages can also create moments of connection and/or excitement for the brands' followers (Liang et al., 2011; Simon & Tossan, 2018). Social media can provide a platform where CMBRs can be developed and improved through the nurturing of a brand community that allows for brand-consumer and consumer-consumer interactions.

JU [TikTok; Vans - commenting on video of a snowboarder]: *any female snowboarders? We should be friends* ☐.

SO [replying to JU]: *here.*

L3 [TikTok; Vans - comment on video of skateboarder]: *I wish I was good at skating* [302 likes].

GB [replying to L3]: *I legit cut my finger the first day I tried skating* ☐ [5 likes].

TY [replying to L3]: *don't feel bad I cracked my head open lmaoo* [6 likes].

GB [replying to TY]: *Omg are you okaay?! LMAO* [1 like].

L3 [replying to TY]: *Love that* [2 likes].

SS [replying to L3]: *don't doubt yourself, if u work hard u can be someday. Nobody has that much skill first starting, over time u progress* [2 likes].

AM [Fat Face; Instagram - post asking followers 'how are you?' as part of Mental Health Awareness week]: *Exhausted. This term/year has been relentless.*

Fat Face [replying to AM]: *thank you for sharing Amy. We can imagine being a teacher has been tough. We hope you are finding ways to relax and take time for you. Our DMs are always open. Sending love your way* ☐.

AM [replying to Fat Face]: *Thank you! About to go potter in the greenhouse* ☐.

Fat Face [replying to AM]: *enjoy* ☐☐☐.

In summary, our research demonstrates that it is neither simple nor straightforward for masstige brands to develop CMBRs with consumers, and to bring consumers together as part of their 'digital campfires' (Wilson, 2020). CMBRs require a great deal of groundwork and careful nurturing, but have the potential to have big payoffs for brands, similarly to CBRs in terms of loyalty, retention and forgiveness against

transgressions (Dessart et al., 2015). Masstige brands need to have a clear strategy on how to interact with consumers on their social media platforms to develop strong consumer-brand connections. This strategy needs to incorporate how the masstige brand will reach out and take the time to interact directly with individuals when they need help or attention (e.g. have a question about a product or have tagged the brand in a post or tweet), make the consumer feel valued. In turn, this can generate consumer affect for the brand and also content for the brand (e.g. Apple's Instagram strategy of using user generated content).

5. Conclusions and future research

5.1. Theoretical contributions

In this article, through an inductive exploration of CMBRs we make three contributions to masstige branding theory:

First, we illustrate how CMBRs, similarly to CBRs, are negotiated within a complex web of social reality, where the co-presence of others shapes the nature and meaning of the CMBR. This builds on the work of McAlexander and Schouten (2002), which ascertains that CBRs are situated in a 'fabric' of relationships. In this article we demonstrate that CMBRs are part of a web of relationships (with people and organisations). The process of developing CMBRs is more intensive than CBRs with luxury and less prestigious mass-market brands (Leahy, 2011; Gurzki, 2019), and in turn the web or relationships in which CMBRs are situated is more complex and capricious in nature. Consumers draw on masstige brands more intensively and ubiquitously than traditional mass-market brands to navigate their social identity projects and to send signals to other consumers in their web about their actual or idealised sense of self (Sirgy & Johar, 1999; Granot et al., 2013; Das et al., 2022). It is therefore not sufficient to analyse CMBRs as single channel relationships between a brand and consumer. A CMBR is a multi-layered web of relationships with people and organisations, as illustrated in Fig. 1. Intimate relationships with significant people and favoured brands are at the heart of this complex web of relationships, providing the consumer with a sense of community, and having a powerful influence in shaping the CMBR (Rodrigues & Rodrigues, 2019). Relationships with other, less favoured brands (including luxury, masstige, and/or mass-market brands) and consumers are also part of this web of relationships, however, these relationships are often more distant and transient in nature. For example, relationships with people the consumer occasionally interacts with in an online brand community or a passing acquaintance who compliments the consumer on their association with the masstige brand. It is the symbolic nature and ongoing negotiation of the status of a masstige brand within this web of relationships that make CMBRs more complex and intense than consumers' relationships with less prestigious mass-market and/or luxury brands, where a brands' status is often more clearly defined and less open to ongoing negotiations. This requires careful management to ensure the brand remains masstige in the mind of the consumer.

Second, through studying CMBRs in an offline and digital context, we expose the volatility, multiplicity and fluidity of this web of relationships that constitute a CMBR. This puts into question the relevance of the Judeo-Christian ideology of CBRs as eternal monogamous marriage relationships between two partners. The relationship concept, as put forward in the seminal work of Fournier (1998), continues to have some relevance in the context of CMBRs. However, it requires reconceptualisation to provide a contemporary understanding of the role of masstige brands in consumers' lives due to the intense nature of CMBRs. Enduring CMBRs need to be understood in the context of the complex web of relationships that influence their status as masstige and consumers' decisions to continue or terminate their connection with the brand (Eastman et al., 2020). CMBRs therefore need to be conceptualised as intense, fluid, dynamic, transient, unstable and interactive processes between multiple agents with CMBRs blurring the lines between liquid and solid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Wider socio-cultural

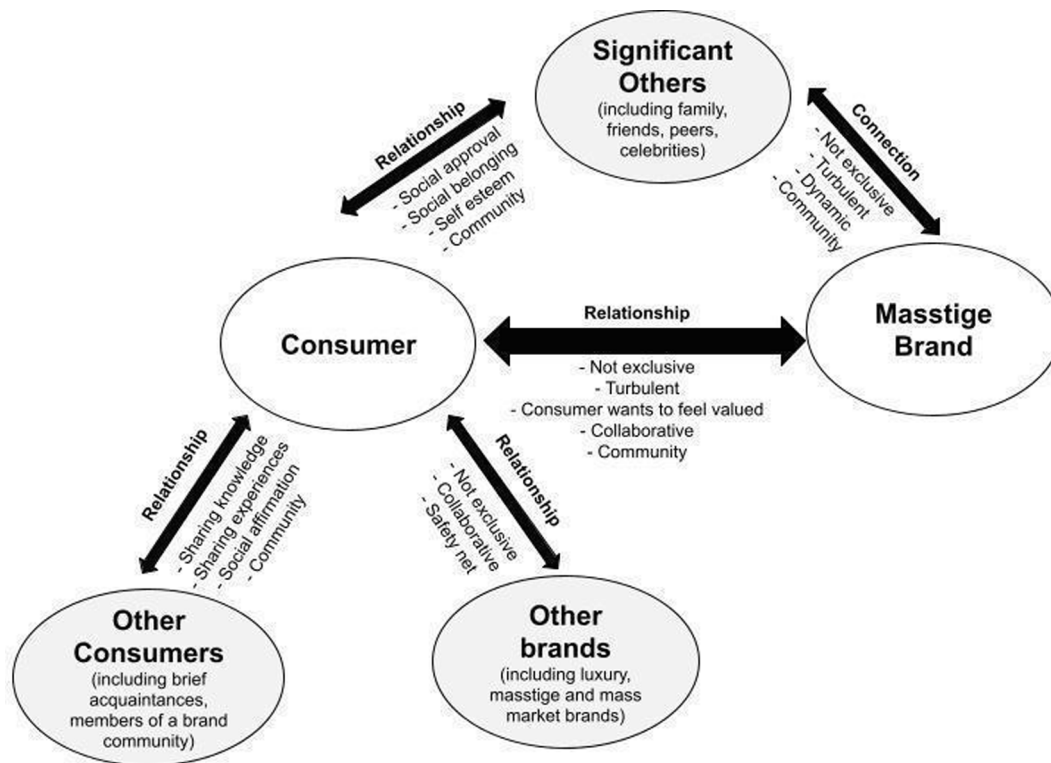


Fig. 1. Consumer-Masstige Brand Relationships.

factors, such as a consumer's financial circumstances, the views and values significant others hold of the brand and lifestyle choices all have a more powerful impact in shaping the nature and meaning of CMBRs. For example, a brand previously perceived by a consumer as masstige might lose its masstige status if the consumer's disposable income increases or if their intimate web considers the brand to no longer be prestigious. The masstige status of a brand is continually negotiated by the consumer and is influenced by the web of relationships illustrated in Figure One.

Our third contribution is that masstige brands need to be viewed as both a collaborator and an enabler. In that strong consumer-masstige brand connections are established and maintained when the masstige brand collaborates with both the consumer and their wider web of relationships. Symbolic consumption is a key motivation for consumers entering into CMBRs (Shipman, 2004). Masstige brands must therefore enable consumers to accomplish their personal goals and identity projects, fulfilling consumers' needs to socially belong to a particular group or to stand out from others (Liang et al., 2011; Wickstrom et al., 2021; Das et al., 2022). However, masstige brands must also go further, working alongside consumers' relationships with masstige, luxury and everyday mass-market brands. Coopetition is therefore vital for CMBRs, in that CMBRs constitute a complex web of simultaneous cooperative and competitive interactions between multiple actors (people and organisations) (Bengtsson & Kock, 2014). To develop and maintain strong CMBRs, consumers want to feel valued by masstige brands and part of a wider community. This is not just achieved through direct interaction with the brand as highlighted earlier, it is also accomplished through interactions and collaborations with other consumers and brands in the wider web of relationships that surround a CMBR. Social media plays a pivotal role in shaping the nature and intensity of CMBRs and can bestow the right environment for the complex social realities of CMBRs to flourish (Aslanidis, 2018). To be effective the social media pages of masstige brands need to establish a sense of community and camaraderie around the brand through informal and formal brand conversations between consumers and brands (Correa et al., 2010; Schouten et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2012). When consuming masstige brands,

consumers have high expectations of the brand, and this includes how the brand interacts with them on social media. Consumers expect masstige brands to personally interact with them when they choose to enter into a dialogue with the brand. This diverges from traditional CBRs, where there are often lower expectations from consumers of personalised direct interactions with the brand, with the brand being perceived as more distant (Leahy, 2011; Gurzki, 2019). Consumers also need to deduce personal value from interacting with a masstige brand and/or other consumers on social media (Turkle, 2017).

5.2. Managerial implications

In this article we demonstrate that it is not only the individual consumer who masstige brand managers need to bring into the CMBR, but consumers' networks and complex webs of relationships (with people and organisations). Brand managers need consumers to be proactive and encourage consumers to introduce their brand to their network, not only to increase sales but to manage the image of their brand within consumers' network. Social media provides an interface for consumers to make such introductions (Wang et al., 2012). For example, by consumers creating a reel or stories of new purchases on Instagram or writing about a positive (or negative) brand experience on Twitter. Masstige brands need to be an active part of consumers' communities, helping them to connect with their brand and with one another. Brands directly interacting with consumers can have huge payoffs, making the consumer feel valued and special, which in turn nurtures and strengthens the CMBR.

When setting a masstige brand strategy that seeks to increase loyalty, brand managers must view consumers as active agents, as collaborators in the brands' story. Marketers need to facilitate interactions not only with consumers but with consumers' multiple networks, which include significant others, such as family, friends, celebrities, and other communities to which they belong. Masstige brands need to encourage consumers to bring their brand into their 'digital campfires' - the private intimate circle they have created. This requires a level of trust that the

brand will not abuse the space the consumer has given them, and for many consumers there must also be a benefit for the consumer, such as the brand helping them to achieve social goals, such as standing out or social approval (Wickstrom et al., 2021).

Marketers also need to understand the appeal of their brand to consumers. They need to determine why consumers are drawn to their brand, is it as a unique brand that enables them to differentiate themselves from others (Kim et al., 2019) or does it allow them to fit in and feel connected to a community they are seeking to be a part of (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012; Saavedra & Bautista, 2020)? This will help in setting the brand strategy, and in particular how to position the brand in consumers' minds. To develop enduring CMBRs, marketers have a complex task ahead - they need to have different conversations with different people, using different formats and channels, whilst trying to manage the brands' identity and maintaining a single voice.

CMBRs are not exclusive, however, consumers feel a sense of loyalty towards preferred brand(s), often wanting to interact with the brand directly on- and off-line and indirectly through conversations with family and peers. When consumers switch to alternatives, perhaps cheaper or more convenient brands, marketers should recognise that these experiences can have two consequences. First, the consumer might prefer the 'new' brand and switch to this brand for a period of time. Secondly, this experience can act as a catalyst in developing a more enduring CMBR, where a stronger connection is established between the consumer and the brand, and in turn minimising future switching behaviour.

5.3. Limitations and further research

The first-stage study was conducted using data from consumers who were mostly Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996), middle-class, and residing in the United Kingdom. It would be insightful for future research to explore cultural and economic differences in CMBRs across different generations, countries and economic statuses. Such research would address whether the brand perception of masstige differs on levels of economic status or cultural differences.

A limitation of our study, and an area for future longitudinal research, would be to follow the development and maintenance of CMBRs on- and off-line, simultaneously mapping how these interactions influence the CMBR. Our research showed that consumers like brands to interact with them online. Future research should therefore explore the impact of artificial intelligence, particularly chatbots on CMBRs. Finally, the potential impact of social media stakeholders such as celebrities on masstige brand perception also provides scope for further exploration.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Emily Moorlock: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ofer Dekel-Dachs:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Peter Stokes:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Gretchen Larsen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Further reading

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Emily Moorlock is a senior lecturer in marketing at Sheffield Hallam University. In 2016 she earned her PhD in exploring Generation Y's consumer-brand relationships. Prior to this she worked in various marketing roles, most notably as a research controller on consumer insight projects, where she specialized in visual methodologies. Her research interests focus on consumer behaviour and exploring how young consumers make sense of the world around them.

Ofer Dekel's work reconceptualizes the traditional view of the main three parts of marketing: Markets, Consumers and Brands. Traditional marketing treats these constructs as fixed and as the outcome of structures, patterns and regularities. Ofer claims that this leads to marketing failure. Instead, marketers need to focus on differences, temporalities and movement. His recent publications have developed visual methodologies suitable for the exploration of identities in contemporary social network dominated reality. His currently work offers support to marginal SMEs in emerging economies that function under institutional void conditions

Professor Peter Stokes is based at the Leicester Castle Business School, De Montfort University (UK). He has researched and published in, and reviewed extensively for, world-class journals. He has held visiting professor/advisor roles in business schools in France, Ireland, Germany, Senegal, Uzbekistan, Hong Kong, China, India, Mexico and Dubai. He has also applied his work to consultancy projects across a range of business sectors. He currently holds positions on major international bodies including: Vice-President-Business Relations and UK Country Director for the EuroMed Research Business Institute; and, UK Ambassador for the Association Francophone de Gestion des Ressources Humaines.

Gretchen Larsen is an Associate Professor of Marketing at Durham University with an expertise in interpretive and critical consumer research. She is particularly interested in the relationship between consumption, marketplace cultures, and the arts. Her work examines the importance of the arts, particularly sound and music, in helping consumers experience and make sense of their world. Much of her work focuses on identity and its relationship to consumption, and more recently it has begun to address affective and embodied responses to sonic phenomena.